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Caroline Malone, Simon Stoddart, Anthony Bonanno and David Trump, eds., *Mortuary Customs in Prehistoric Malta: Excavations at the Brochtorff Circle at Xagħra (1987–94)*. (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2009, 521 pp., 333 figs., hbk, ISBN 978-1-902937-49-6)

This is a major monograph on the ‘Cambridge Gozo Project’: a large-scale, collaborative archaeological field project led by the editors of the volume, designed to shed new light on the mortuary practices, settlement and environment of the Maltese island of Gozo during the Temple Period (4100–2500 BC), particularly through the excavation of the Xagħra Circle mortuary complex.

An international team of 31 scholars has contributed to the volume. The Introduction usefully places the project and Xagħra Circle in an historical context. Chapter 2 centres on a critically aware specialist report on the terrestrial mollusc shells recovered from the Xagħra Circle – interpreted as indicative of a treeless but relatively dense steppe or garrigue vegetation at this hilltop site in the Neolithic, followed by the first thinning of vegetation in the Temple Period. Chapter 3 describes the excavation at Ġħajnsielem of the remains of a pair of rare Temple Period house structures with successive floors. Chapter 4 then contextualizes the Xagħra Circle in relation to neighbouring, contemporary ritual sites known on the south side of the Xagħra plateau, including the Ġgantija temple complex. The following nine chapters document the archaeological analysis of the Xagħra Circle. Chapter 5 describes the variety of scientific methods deployed. Chapter 6 introduces the complex archaeological sequence of the Circle: a dynamic natural cave system that was transformed during the later prehistoric period, from the site of a rock-cut tomb and other mortuary deposits in the Final Neolithic Żebbuġ phase, to a monumental funerary site in the Temple Period (including a megalithic enclosure, threshold area, steps, screens, shrine, doorway, and

burial spaces densely packed with primary and secondary burials), to a non-funerary (but not necessarily domestic) site in the Bronze Age. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 then detail the spatial and stratigraphic analysis of the Żebbuġ, Tarxien and Tarxien Cemetery phase deposits and architecture. Chapter 10 and supporting appendices catalogue the material culture retrieved from the Circle, including: some 76,000 sherds of pottery; tools of stone and bone; ornaments of shell, stone, bone and clay; and figurative artworks of stone and clay. Chapter 11 discusses the human bones in terms of the demography, health (generally good), diet (mainly terrestrial), and mortuary practices (mostly secondary) of the buried population; it also details the animal remains, which are dominated by domestic sheep/goat, cow, then pig. Chapter 12 discusses the AMS radiocarbon dating of 19 samples of human and animal bone from the Circle and its implications for the chronology of prehistoric Malta. Chapters 13 and 14 then discuss the wider significance of the project results for Maltese prehistory, and interpretively reconstruct some of the dynamic ritual processes experienced at the Xagħra Circle (the ‘pure conjecture’ on pages 380–3 being particularly stimulating). Finally, ten appendices supplement the data presented in the preceding chapters. Throughout, the text is accompanied by a very generous number of well produced and informative illustrations and tables.

The achievements of the Gozo project and of this resulting monograph are undeniably significant. The re-discovery, modern scientific excavation, recording and analysis, and, now, full publication of the architecture and rich mortuary deposits of the Xagħra Circle site are outstanding milestones in the history of the archaeology of the Maltese Islands. They add greatly to our knowledge of prehistoric Maltese mortuary practices, so poorly served by the (original) ‘excavation’ and publication of the Hal Saflieni hypogeum and other Maltese rock-cut tombs. Indeed, the Xagħra Circle, with its huge and carefully studied assemblage of human remains (some 220,000 bones, representing over 800 individuals), now provides an

important, world-class, example for the archaeology of death. The large number and variety of archaeologically important finds, including some unique figurative artworks – such as the twin figures seated on a couch and the cache of nine human- and animal-headed idols – have added significantly to the collections and displays of the Gozo Museum of Archaeology (over one third of all surviving figurative material from prehistoric Malta now comes from the Xaghra Circle), and to Maltese national pride. The sizeable number of high-quality radiocarbon determinations produced on samples of bone from the Xaghra Circle helps to refine the chronological framework for prehistoric Malta (more than doubling the number of radiocarbon dates now available). In fact, the Xaghra Circle now has to rank as one of the most important Maltese prehistoric sites, alongside the hypogeum of Ħal Saflieni (cleared by Magri then Zammit), the temple site of Tarxien (excavated by Zammit), and the settlement and later temple site of Skorba (excavated by Trump). The Gozo Project's excavation of the Għajnsielem site also adds to our limited knowledge of Maltese Temple Period houses.

Given these substantial achievements, any criticisms of the volume can only be minor. A general comment concerns the length of time taken to bring the results of the project to full publication (15 years since the completion of the fieldwork), and I am sure that the long wait has been frustrating at times for everyone concerned. Some consolation was offered, right from the start of the project, by the large number of interim reports published on the Gozo Project, but as a consequence much of this volume will be fairly familiar (at least to regional specialists), although it does present valuable new data and illustrations, accompanied by helpful interpretative up-dates and syntheses. Furthermore, it is essential to now have the whole lot comprehensively packaged. Other criticisms are more specific, and relate mainly to method and theory. Coverage of the Gozo survey is disappointing, with few details presented, for example, on the sampling strategy or on the earlier Neolithic sites discovered on Ta' Kuljat, and with complete analysis of the results postponed to an unspecified later

date. The reliance upon traditionally-defined, and – arguably – idiosyncratic, ceramic styles to chart the chronological development of the Xagħra Circle site, supported only in places by radiocarbon dates, is disappointing, but was perhaps inevitable given the large number (1329) of recorded contexts. Similarly, all of the pottery sherds stylistically classified as ‘exotic’ (p. 238) should not be assumed to be so, until provenanced scientifically – an opportunity that was also missed for the obsidian from the site. The claim (p. 38) that ‘the deforestation of Gozo occurred very early in the Neolithic occupation’, although possible, seems difficult to substantiate with reference to the molluscan data from the Xagħra Circle, none of which has been dated to this period. The continued use of the traditional term ‘huts’ to describe prehistoric Maltese domestic structures, including those found at Ġħajnsielem, unfortunately distances the interpretation of these structures from the flourishing interdisciplinary anthropology and archaeology of houses. Likewise, the conscious perpetuation of the misspelling of the name of the artist, Charles de Brochtorff (who actually signed himself Brocktorff), who produced some of the earliest drawings of the Xagħra Circle, and after whom the site was named by the project, seems excessive. Finally, despite the promise in the Preface of a ‘theme of the body’ (p. xxiii), there is less here on how the Maltese Temple People fed, represented and perceived their bodies than might have been expected.

Moving beyond these finer details of the Gozo Project, the published results and their discussion remind us of the numerous fundamental questions of Maltese prehistory. How different and isolated or similar and connected were the Maltese prehistoric islanders, particularly to contemporary societies in the South-Central Mediterranean? How fragile was the ecology and population of Temple Period Malta? What form did the dwelling places of the Maltese Temple People take? What was the place of burials and of the dead in the landscape and cosmology of the Temple People? What form did mortuary rituals take, and what part did human remains, art-works and other material symbols play in ritual

performances? How were these performances experienced, sensed and understood? How and why were they transformed over time? And how can the demise of the Temple Culture be explained? This book does not answer all of these questions conclusively, but it does provide an important factual basis for their continued study. So, to put it simply, no one can now study Maltese prehistory without reference to this book.

Robin Skeates

Durham University, UK